New York
Theatre Critics' Reviews
1956

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Li'l Abner"

New York Post

November 16, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Hit Musical Saga of Dogpatch

They have made a gay, colorful and lavish musical comedy extravaganza out of Al Capp's "Li'l Abner." I suppose it has a particular interest for those of us who are enthusiastic followers of Mr. Capp's brilliantly sardonic comic strip, but, since this appears to include most of America, it shouldn't limit the popularity of the entertaining new show that opened to tumultuous applause at the St. James Theater last night. And I feel sure even those who are unaccountably unaware of the satiric lore of Dogpatch and its denizens will have a fine time learning what they've been missing.

To the Capp fans, it will be a comforting revelation to discover how wonderfully all the members of the company, most emphatically including the admirable chorus, resemble the distinguished Dogpatch citizenry in both appearance and spirit. Such celebrated personages as Abner, Mammy and Pappy Yokum, Daisy Mae, Marryin' Sam, Gen. Bullmoose, Evil Eye Fleagle and Stupefyin' Jones, to name a few of those appearing prominently in the action, look and act just the way they should. And interlopers in the audience should find them a curious and brightly picturesque lot.

The Saga

Strangers may have a few troubles with the book, but in that they won't differ greatly from the Capp addicts who follow the strip with a student's care. It is probably the fault of excessive fidelity on the part of Norman Panama and Melvin Frank, the authors of the libretto. In a praiseworthy effort to get as much as possible of the saga of Li'l Abner into their narrative, they have rather cluttered it with plot, and I don't mind confessing that I sometimes had difficulty in solving its intricacies. But there is enough liveliness in the show to make this only a minor handicap.

The important thing, in addition to the remarkably accurate casting, is that Johnny Mercer has written some characteristically delightful lyrics and Michael Kidd has staged the book, the musical numbers and the dances with his customary imaginative gusto and resource. It is true that the Swiftian savagery of Mr. Capp has been transformed into geniality, but Mr. Mercer has injected a frequently satirical note into his lyrics that is life-saving to the cartoonist's spirit. As for Mr. Kidd, his staging of the Sadie Hawkins Day ballet shows what a comic master of his art he is.

The music by Gene de Paul is not, I suppose, unduly original, but it is always tuneful and highly agreeable. I think my favorite song is "Jubilation T. Cornpone," and that is in part because Stubby Kaye, the unforgettable Nicely-Nicely of "Guys and Dolls," handles it with his usual perfection. I also particularly liked the engaging "If I Had My Druthers," the Daisy Mae-Abner duet called "Namely You," and an indignant number of Gen. Bullmoose's known as "Progress Is the Root of All Evil." In fact, the songs, the color and the pace happily make the complexities of the book unimportant.

Edith Adams has just the right note of guileful innocence for Daisy Mae, and Peter Palmer, a newcomer, succeeds in looking like both Li'l Abner and Mr. Capp, which makes him ideal for the part. And he and Miss Adams sing attractively. Charlotte Rae and Joe E. Marks are perfect choices for Mammy and Pappy Yokum, and Howard St. John and Al Nesor are unfailing as Gen. Bullmoose and Evil Eye Fleagle. This, indeed, is true of all of them, especially Mr. Kaye, who is Marryin' Sam; Tina Louise, the seductive Appasionata von Climax, and Julie Newmar, accurately cast as Stupefyin' Jones. There should be applause for every member of the chorus. "L'il Abner" is in fine hands.

"LI'L ABNER"

Musical comedy with book by Norman Panama and Melvin Frank, based on the characters created by Al Capp; choreography and staging by Michael Kidd; lyrics by Johnny Mercer; music by Gene de Paul; settings and lighting by William and Jean Eckart; costumes by Alvin Colt; musical direction by Lehman Engel; orchestrations by Philip J. Lang; ballet music arranged by Genevieve Pitot; presented by Norman Panama, Melvin Frank and Michael Kidd at the St. James Theatre, November 15, 1956. The cast:

Moonbeam McSwine.....Carmen Alvarez
Marryin' Sam.....Stubby Kaye
Earthquake McGoon..Bern Hoffman
Daisy Mae.....Edith Adams
Pappy Yokum.....Joe E. Marks
Mamy Yokum.....Charlotte Rae
Li'l Abner.....Peter Palmer
Mayor Dawgmeat...Oran Osburn
Senator Jack S. Phogbound.....Ted Thurston
Dr. Rasmussen T. Finsdale....Stanley Simmonds
Government Man..Richard Maitland
Available Jones...William Lanteau
Stupefyin' Jones....Julie Newmar
General Bullmoose..Howard St. John
Appassionata Von Climax.....Tina Louise
Evil Eye Fleagle.....Al Nesor
Dr. Smithborn.....George Reeder
Dr. Korgmeyer.....Ralph Linn
Dr. Schleitz.....Marc Breaux

DAILY NEWS

November 16, 1956

'Li'l Abner' Splendid Musical, Brilliantly Directed and Played

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The publisher of this newspaper probably will order me hanged from the masthead when he learns here that I have not got myself wrapped up in a comic strip since "Buster Brown," "Foxy Grandpa" and "Doc Yak." And I haven't seen a musical comedy version of a comic strip since "Mutt and Jeff." So I may not be enough of a funnypaper follower to qualify as an expert in reporting on "Li'l Abner," which opened last evening at the St. James Theatre. But, expert or no, I hereby report that this musical is wonderful—simply wonderful.

Al Capp, inventor of this comic strip, may have created many delightful characters like Abner, Daisy Mae, Earthquake McGoon, Pappy and Mammy Yokum and Evil Eye Fleagle, but the people who created last night's musical were a great big team of lovable lunatics.

Kidd Heads Team

This team includes Michael Kidd, who has directed a series of dance, song and comedy numbers with incredible skill and joyfulness; Johnny Mercer, whose lyrics bring to mind the salty and saucy days of Lorenz Hart and Ira Gershwin; Norman Panama and Melvin Frank, who have made the plot; Gene de Paul, a composer with a remarkable gift for melody and humor; Alvin Colt, a costumer of rare invention, and William and Jean Eckart, scene designers who must have been born and bred in the hillbilly community of Dogpatch.

And then there is a cast which is as remarkable for its ability to entertain as for its picturesqueness, with Edith Adams and Peter Palmer heading the troupe in the roles of Daisy Mae and Li'l Abner. These two have 35 or 40 playmates, including a whole herd of lightfooted and happy dancers—and not including various geese, donkeys, pigs and hounds which play their parts better than Sirs Laurence Olivier and Ralph Richardson could play them.

Critically Humorous

The human playmates include Stubby Kaye in the role of Marryin' Sam, a tubby conniver; Charlotte Rae as a fabulously funny Mammy Yokum; Joe E. Marks as her marvelous spouse, Pappy; Howard St. John as Gen. Bullmoose, as dirty a plotter as ever soiled the District of Columbia; Al Nesor as Fleagle, a man with a whammy in each eye—and such appetizing females as Julie Newmar and Tina Louise, who are known, respectively, as Stupefyin' Jones and Appassionata von Climax.

The plot is a satisfying mixture of hillbilly nonsense and sharp, critical humor—and the Mercer lyrics are the most critically humorous things in the show as they jab at our personal and national foibles. The song-and-dance numbers, as staged by Kidd, are swift and joyful.

"Li'l Abner" is a top flight American musical, ranking with "Guys and Dolls." Last evening I decided I was going to like it all very much soon after the curtain rose and this fetching little Edith Adams sidled up to this big lunk, Peter Palmer, and said, shyly, "Abner, I brought you some worms."

Daily Mirror

November 16, 1956

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Li'l Abner' Proves Howling Comedy Hit

• Al Capp's famous characters come to life in mad musical at St. James.

Dogpatch was swept from the Southern hills right onto the St. James Theatre stage Thursday evening, when Norman Panama, Melvin Frank and Michael Kidd installed "Li'l Abner" there. Nothing so cyclonic has struck the Main Stem since Olsen and Johnson's "Hellzapoppin'."

Panama and Frank have based their mad musical on Al Capp's famous comic strip characters. They're all there: Li'l Abner, Daisy Mae, Pappy and Mammy Yokum, Marryin' Sam, Earthquake McGoon, Moonbeam McSwine, Available Jones and Evil Eye Fleagle. To their cockeyed book, Johnny Mercer has supplied amusing lyrics, and Gene de Paul a hummable score.

THE TROUBLE ALL starts when the Government decides to blow Dogpatch off the map as unnecessary. That means that Daisy Mae won't have a chance to snag Abner on Sadie Hawkins Day. But the bureaucrats are foiled in the end, and a couple of crooks who would capitalize on Yokum Juice get theirs.

Kidd has staged "Li'l Abner" at supersonic speech. His choreography breaks the sound barrier. It's furiously fast and funny. And he's done a perfect job of casting. He's typed the leads to the life. You'll recognize your favorites immediately.

Edith Adams looks so much like Daisy Mae, and Peter Palmer like Li'l Abner, that they might have stepped right out of a DAILY MIRROR page. Edie is a darling, and Pete, big, rawboned and good-looking in a rugged way. Stubby Kaye is up to his old scene-stealing tricks as Marryin' Sam, and Howard St. John is right dastardly as General Bullmoose.

Joe E. Marks, Charlotte Rae, Ted Thurston, William Lanteau, Al Nesor and Bern Hoffman are as real as Capp's imagination. In case your eyes have become a bit dull, there are scads of orb tonics to make 'em pop. Tina Louise and Julie Newmar are beautifully upholstered babes.

CAPP'S DOGPATCHERS are not noted for subtlety. They're a primitive people, and their humor is earthy. The heroes have hearts of gold, and the villains are as black as they come. If they lack finesse, they're a lusty, likeable lot. That's why millions follow their doings daily.

There's enough livestock behind the St. James footlights to fill a zoo. Geese, pigs, beagle hounds and a donkey dash frenziedly about the premises, tripping up the local yokels and hoity-toity socialites with deadly intent.

Philip J. Lang has arranged the Mercer-De Paul score in zingy fashion. We particularly liked his swingy use of a banjo in the pit. Lehman Engel's orchestra is calculated to make a rhythm-deaf customer start tapping his tootsies in time.

William and Jean Eckart have provided a few tons of atmospheric scenery, while Alvin Colt has created costumes designed to display some of the shapeliest gals this side of the Atlantic City beauty pageant.

THE FIRST-NIGHTERS greeted "Li'l Abner" with palm-blistering applause. Their laughter made the walls quake. They hailed the new arrival as a howling hit.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

November 16, 1956

This Is All a Plot Against Dogpatch

By TOM DONNELLY.

To put it simply, Al Capp's two-dimensional cartoon world has not been given a magical third dimension in "Li'l Abner" (at the St. James). You could go so far as to say that a dimension has been taken away. Those aren't real Dogpatch people stompin' and whompin' and cavortin' across that stage. Those are (sob!) Broadway actors done up in funny looking costumes.

Maybe the task of recreating Dogpatch in persuasive footlights terms was (gulp!) an impossible one. Norman Panama and Melvin Frank, who wrote the book for "Li'l Abner," have made heavy weather of it, certainly. They have been unwilling to assume that everybody knows what Dogpatch is all about, and instead of putting an established and recognizable world on the stage, they have felt obliged to explain what they are talking about as they go along.

It would have been a terrible drag on "Guys and Dolls" if its creations had assumed the burden of informing the customers that there were gamblers on Broadway, and that these gentlemen were interested in a social and professional pastime known as "betting on the bangtails," and that these chaps associate with "chorus girls" who sometimes work in "night spots."

'Cornpone Square.'

"Li'l Abner" is crammed with verbiage approximately on this order: "Cornpone Square! You mean there's gonna be a meeting in Cornpone Square? Why that means a change in the Dogpatch way of life!" (Now it may very well be that "Cornpone Square" is a Panama-Frank invention, suggested by, rather than borrowed from, the extensive output of Mr. Capp. Nevertheless, the complaint still goes. The book for "Li'l Abner" is a buzz of footnotes.)

It is, incidentally, a very old-fashioned book, for all that it deals with such dire modern possibilities as the destruction of Dogpatch by atom bombs. The evening abounds in conflicts, schemes, and counter-schemes, all of them laboriously preposterous, none of them successfully satiric, most of them not very funny. In an earlier, though comparatively recent, theatrical day, a producer who wanted to do a show about a lady who saved the Panama Canal single-handed would call in a high-voltage star like Ethel Merman to put the nonsense over.

The basic stuff of "Li'l Abner" is of that flimsy-flamsy variety which could be redeemed only by the inspired clowning of a larger-than-life comic personality.

Ingratiating Actors.

"Li'l Abner" has three ingratiating performers of the "Second Banana" category. Stubby Kaye brightens things up immeasureably as Marryin' Sam, Charlotte Rae is a dandy Mammy Yokum, and Howard St. John, usually employed in more sedate enterprises, is droll as an evil tycoon whose simple childhood dream was to grow up and get his hands on all the money in the world.

In the center of the disturbance, we find Peter Palmer and Edith Adams as Li'l Abner and Daisy Mae. They are attractive physical reflections of the paper and ink originals, they sing very prettily, and they are utterly vibrationless. A nice juvenile, and a nice ingenue, and that's it.

Johnny Mercer and Gene de Paul have come up with a couple of serviceable songs ("If I Had My Druthers" and "Rag Offen the Bush"), a few that aim at wit and fall short ("The Country's in the Very Best of Hands," etc.), and at least one ("Love in a Home") that would be a perfect expression for the newlyweds in a fancy furniture advertisement, but comes oddly from the lips of plain folks like Li'l Abner and Daisey Mae.

Fast and Furious.

Michael Kidd's over-all direction is fast and furious, and his choreography is as frantically acrobatic as any I've seen. It's not what you might call delicately imaginative, but it is ingenious, amusing, and far and away the finest feature of the show.

The dancers who execute these maneuvers have inspired my deep admiration for their skill and abandon, and my earnest hope that the management has guaranteed to supply them with all the liniment they can use.

P.S. The ladies who have been assigned the historic and anatomically demanding roles of Moonbeam McSwine, Stupefyin' Jones, and Appassionata Von Climax, acquit themselves nobly.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
November 16, 1956

THEATER

'Li'l Abner'

By WALTER KERR

THERE'S a sleazy little fellow in a long green frock-coat, a stringy red tie, and an eleven-gallon saucer-type hat who cavorts through "Li'l Abner" under the pseudonym of Evil Eye Fleagle. He gives whammies. With his long gold watch-chain dangling about his knees and his body all curled up in an excess of concentration, he can give a whammy that will ricochet right off one sturdy customer and knock another, even sturdier, customer into the middle of next week.

But Evil Eye Fleagle is not the only occupant of the St. James stage who believes in whammies. Everybody does, everybody and his backers. The X-ray eye and the big bass drum and the loudest trumpets since Jericho fell were blasting away at us all night.

The curtain was hardly up before the ducks and the geese and the pigs and the donkeys that support the "hooman" population of Al Capp's Dogpatch were scooting and quacking and squealing across the stage. When the pigtailed girls and the suspender-strap boys came hurtling on, the steam blasted louder against a lid that wasn't there.

• • •

Michael Kidd, director and choreographer, knows how to set fists and feet pounding against the floor like a thousand rifles going off at once. He does it in a stomp called "Jubilation T. Cornpone," he does it in a high-and-mighty hoedown called "Rag Offen the Bush," and he does it all over "Society Party" in which the country folk jazz the hides off some swells.

Every time he does it the air sizzles and crackles. Every time a friend or enemy takes a snort of Kickapoo Joy Juice or Yokumberry Tonic you can count on the lights to flash, the bare-legged girls to scream, and the muscular males to go spinning through space. Every time—or nearly every time—the orchestra strikes up for one of Johnny Mercer's and Gene de Paul's salutes to comic-strip fury, the beat is driving, the voices are clamoring, and the scenery sways in the wind. It's all done with zip and zingo, and I guess you could say the show was a rip-snorting, ring-tailed roarer, all right.

• • •

Am I just not subject to whammies? Or is there one lazy little quality in the funny, fabulous world of Al Capp that nobody has thought to bring along? Capp is a satirist, to be sure, and there's a real place here for a stern little quartet labeled "What's Good for General Bullmoose" or even for a scientific dither in which we are promised "assembly-line babies and conveyer-belt storks." Capp is also a master of the grotesque, and there's no reason why Mammy Yokum shouldn't walk bowlegged in what looks like candy-stick underwear or why Appassionata Von Climax's fur-bearing decolletage shouldn't cause Li'l Abner to bring his hat to his heart in salute.

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But the good folk of Capp, as I read them, also have what I tremble to call charm: a lazy, good-for-nothing, matter-of-fact, take-it-for-granted ornery and "natcherl" charm. They don't know how explosive they are: it comes out without thinking. Only once in the evening did I feel that Dogpatch was real enough, and in its outrageous way warm enough, to be ready for admission as a State right after Hawaii and Alaska. That was when Abner and a few fellow galoots lolled splendidly on a giant old riverside tree, dipped their home-made fish-poles into reflected green and yellow water (the William and Jean Eckart set is a honey) and sang the immensely relaxed and attractive tune "If I Had My Druthers." They had the real clue right here.

• • •

Peter Palmer is a manly Li'l Abner, Edith Adams is all cream and sugar for Abner to pour over his breakfast pork chops, Joe E. Marks makes an ideal Pappy Yokum and Stubby Kaye a vigorous Marryin' Sam, and Howard St. John is the best of the lot when it comes to suggesting the irrepressible good humor that lies at the base of the most scurrilous Capp jibe.

I have a strong feeling that this musical-comedy "Li'l Abner," like its Evil Eye Fleagle, is going to succeed. It is expertly drummed out, all the way. But it is also an assembly-line, conveyor-belt job, with the dynamos buzzing in your ears, and I miss the innocent Dogpatch breeze that one expects from a mean-minded zephyr named Capp.

The New York Times
November 16, 1956

Theatre: 'Li'l Abner'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

IF everyone in "Li'l Abner," which opened at the St. James last evening, were as talented as Michael Kidd, everything would be as brilliant as the ballets, and probably the world would be gayer, too.

For Mr. Kidd is not only the balletmaster but the director of the musical made from Al Capp's celebrated comic strip. Mr. Kidd is also one of the producers, although that is neither here nor there.

•

He is the man who has made something exciting and hilarious out of the mating-race in which the Dogpatch girls put the Indian sign on the Dogpatch boys. All that happens really is that the girls leg it after the boys at top speed. But Mr. Kidd is the man who can see comic-strip humor in this primitive rite by varying the speed, by introducing low-comedy antics and by giving "Li'l Abner" its most exuberant scene. Say a word of gratitude, too, to the boys and girls, amusingly costumed by Alvin Colt, who race, jump and brawl through this harum-scarum ballet.

Despite the industrious dramaturgy of Norman Panama and Melvin Frank, who have written the libretto, there is one sober side to the idea of musicalizing the Al Capp comic strip. It stubbornly refuses to move. Thanks to the casting, to the costuming and the Eckarts' scenery, the introduction to the Dogpatch characters is enjoyable. A tall, massive, low-brow Abner by Peter Palmer; a sunny, friendly Daisy Mae by Edith Adams and a whole parcel of Dogpatch eccentrics by a whole parcel of lively actors—introduce "Li'l Abner" with some hospitable clowning and fooling.

But it is difficult to make a fluent musical romance out of some characters who may have hearts of gold but are not very bright in the upper story. And the libretto of "Li'l Abner" gives an impression of pushing and shoving without achieving momentum in the story. The authors have had to face the problem of fantasticating a comic-strip that is already fantastic. For Mr. Capp's fiction cartoon does not seem to have much versatility.

Like Mr. Kidd, Gene de Paul and Johnny Mercer have broken loose with a pleasant score and some entertaining lyrics. Fortunately, Stubby Kaye, the tubby grifter from "Guys and Dolls," is gainfully employed again. He is vastly enjoyable as Marryin' Sam, who knows how to make a song stand up and take notice. Nothing in the show quite equals his rolling style with a first-rate song called "Jubilation T. Cornpone," ably abetted by other Dogpatch residents whom Mr. Kidd has adroitly directed.

He and Miss Adams sing "Namely You" with great charm and good nature. And Li'l Abner's report from Washington about the state of the nation. "The Country's In the Very Best of Hands," is uproarious. Mr. Palmer, tall and earnest, Mr. Kaye, brief and tolerant, give that song great resonance and humor.

•

Early in the second act there is another ironically funny song entitled "Oh, Happy Day." Some scientists joyfully look forward in that song to the production of a standard race of human beings who will be uniformly healthy and dull. On the whole, the composer and the writer of the lyrics have been luckier than the librettists.

"Li'l Abner" is a genial, busy, good-looking show with a number of excellent songs and jovial performers. And it is certain that the civic spirit of Dogpatch is ideal. You could not ask for better folks to get along with. But Mr. Panama and Mr. Frank have had a lot of trouble in disciplining them into the form of a narrative. They do not take kindly to any sort of discipline. Mr. Kidd can do more with them than anyone else.

Journal American
November 16, 1956

Doings in Dogpatch Musical a Sure Hit

By JOHN McCLAIN

IF THERE IS ONE PERSON in the world who is not familiar with Al Capp's strange retinue and ideology, as expressed in his daily comic strip, "Li'l Abner," he would have been frequently baffled and occasionally revolted at the St. James Theatre last night. For this musical creation, based on the characters from the funnies, depends upon a sense of devotion to the limited outlook of the denizens of Dogpatch, U.S.A., and the full understanding that, like the two Bassett hounds that roamed the stage at intervals, existence is merely the wide-eyed quest of the next bone.

But for those who don't know about Al Capp's rustic world, if such there be, the philosophy of the evening strikes a sour note. At the risk of being called a cornball I think it's poor timing to feature a song about "The Country's in the Very Best of Hands," which attempts to show it isn't, and to haul out and shove all over the stage that dreary caricature of the relentless zillionaire.

I was not even transported by the joke about the State Department. The man says to the government guy, "How did you get your job?" and the obvious imbecile answers, "Just because I was terribly loyal." No longer very funny.

But all this is by way of saying that while I think "Li'l Abner" is often guilty of questionable taste, it is sure to be a great big hit. It has as sprightly and decorative a chorus as we've seen in recent semesters and the dancers are beautifully schooled by Michael Kidd, who did the overall direction and choreography. The numbers have enormous zest and originality.

Engaging Score

Add to this a wonderfully engaging score by Johnny Mercer and Gene de Paul, the assistance of an excellent orchestra, and the ingredients of a musical success are nearly achieved. Notable tunes are: "If I Had My Druthers," "Namely You," "Oh, Happy Day," "I'm Past My Prime" and "Progress is the Root of All Evil."

There is also enough humor in the situations and lines to carry the evening, and the dedicated Capp fans will find their favorites faithfully brought to life. The story is inconsequential, but it is sufficient to bring into being the peculiar talents of such prominent Dogpatchers as Lonesome Polecat, Marryin' Sam, Hairless Joe, Earthquake McGoon, Moonbeam McSwine, Sen. Phogbound, Gen. Bullmoose, Evil Eye Fleagle, dogs, geese, a pig, a mule and a barrell of Kickapoo Indian Joy Juice.

In the role of Daisy Mae they have made a brilliant choice in Edith Adams. She is always seductive in shorts and a tattered blouse, her only costume for the evening; she can sing and act competently.

Her devotion to her unresponsive boy friend is unremitting and endearing.

As Abner, a towering young man named Peter Palmer comes forward with authority and charm. He has a good voice and has captured the simple conceit of the character with great effect. Other fine performances are given by Stubby Kaye, as Marryin' Sam; Howard St. John, as Gen. Bullmoose; Charlotte Rae, as Mammy Yokum; Ted Thurston, as Sen. Phogbound, Joe E. Marks, as Pappy Yokum; Al Nesor, as Evil Eye Fleagle and Tina Louise, as Appasionata von Climax.

There are a series of bright sets by William and Jean Eckart and Alvin Colt's costumes are suitably (sob!) frowsy.

"Li'l Abner" is bountiful, lively and tuneful. We won't all agree with its taste or its tenets, but it is a cinch to be with us for many a Dogpatch moon.

New York
Theatre Critics' Reviews
OFFERS

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"A Very Special Baby"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

November 15, 1956

Another Family Is Heard From

By TOM DONNELLY.

There is some good stuff in "A Very Special Baby" (at the Playhouse). Playwright Robert Alan Aurthur has provided his actors with scenes they can get their teeth into, and they oblige with a display of gnashing and tearing that is hotly theatrical.

The plot is a sensible mechanism; the character described in the title is not a humdrum one; Martin Ritt's direction is brisk and to the point, and there are no distressing gaps in the overall picture.

Why doesn't the business add up to something very special?

An Amiable Lout.

First let us consider the narrative. Joey Casale is 34, an amiable lout who has had a brief period of competence and glory in the Army, but who has drifted along for years on an allowance provided by his loudly affectionate father. Joey is not a cafe society playboy. He has a dream. He wants to open an appliance store with a buddy.

Will Papa put up the necessary $5500 for Joey's share?

Nothing Basically Wrong.

Papa won't. Having undermined Joey from birth by unfavorably comparing him with his successful brothers (a big lawyer; a big doctor) and by encouraging him to be as childish as possible, Papa turns on the boy in a climactic moment and reveals his submerged hatred of him. When Joey was born, his mother died, and Papa hurls at his son an oath and a bitter accusation: "You killed my wife!"

The loving family as a kind of death trap is a concept that can be endlessly exploited, and there is nothing basically wrong with Mr. Aurthur's variation on the theme. It wouldn't be fair to say that there is less than meets the eye in "A Very Special Baby." It is closer to the truth to say that everything meets the eye. Nothing is left to the imagination.

The characters are small people, explained away in familiar terms. They have no ideas, no philosophical attitudes (unless you count the father's pronouncement that young men are soft nowadays), no view of the world around them.

They can't very well have a view of the world around them, I suppose, since that world is constructed almost exclusively of automobiles, barbecue pits, household details, plans for Florida vacations, etc.

No Dream-Laden Symbol.

Joey's appliance store doesn't suggest a dream-laden symbol of escape and achievement. It merely suggests an appliance store.

Occasionally "A Very Special Baby" abandons the concretely close-to-hand to ask a larger question, as when Joey's older sister sobs: "How did I become a nothing?" A good query, and since she can't answer it, Mr. Aurthur should have. If the characters in a drama are too simple to have any fascinating insights or reflections, the playwright must contrive to persuade us that HE has them, at any rate.

Jack Warden is immensely appealing as the beleaguered Joey, Luther Adler gives a wonderfully purple and resoundingly effective performance as the father, and Sylvia Sidney does handsomely by the rather shadowy role of the sister.

"A Very Special Baby" is an expanded version of a television playlet, by the way, and no doubt there will be those who will raise the familiar cry that material that fills an hour of video time nicely may look a little skimpy when it is stretched across the stage of the living theater. I will be found in the forefront of any group raising this cry, head thrown back, mouth wide open.

"A VERY SPECIAL BABY"

Play by Robert Alan Aurthur; staged by Martin Ritt; setting and lighting by Howard Bay; costumes by John Boxer; a Talent Associates production presented by David Susskind at the Playhouse Theatre, November 14, 1956. The cast:

Joey.....Jack Warden
Anna.....Sylvia Sidney
Casale.....Luther Adler
Augie.....Will Kuluva
George.....Carl Low
Carmen.....Jack Klugman

Daily Mirror

November 15, 1956

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Very Special Baby' Lacks Mass Appeal

• Luther Adler and Sylvia Sidney head an excellent cast.

The word "bitter" has been popping up a lot of late in this space. Well, "A Very Special Baby" is a very bitter play. We can't help it if our playwrights and producers are going in for scripts packed with hate, cruelty and recrimination this season.

The new arrival at the Playhouse has to do with an Italian patriarch, who started as a hod carrier and became a millionaire. One of his sons is an eminent doctor, another a successful lawyer. Two of his daughters have married well. He's proud of them all. But his old-fashioned mansion on Long Island, a shrine to his dead wife, has to be cared for.

THIS ONEROUS duty falls to his youngest son and daughter. With papa spending the profits from his construction business in swanky Florida hotels, the spinster wants to sell the house and have a life of her own. But the old tyrant will have none of it. After all, there's the very special baby to be considered.

He's a baby only in his father's mind, for he's fought in two wars and is 34 years old. He's special because his birth cost his mother's life. There's always been money to back businesses in which he's doomed to fail, but when it loks as though he's found one that really might succeed, the head of the house puts his foot down.

So the baby of the family, determined to stand on his own feet, walks out. Leaving the sister with her broken dreams, and his selfish dad crushed—at least for the moment. Here, as you can see, are the elements for tense drama. Yet Robert Alan Aurthur is seldom able to make the ingredients explode with a truly terrifying crash.

"A Very Special Baby" is as honest as a dollar backed by gold. Its people are real. Their dilemma commands your respect. Still, this is a case of a play smaller than tragedy, but making no concessions to those seeking popular entertainment. And there's the rub.

UNDER MARTIN RITT'S direction, an excellent cast acts it for more than it's worth. Luther Adler contributes a vivid portrait of a willful, domineering, vengeful father. Sylvia Sidney, mistress of emotions, uses her art with telling effect as the lonely daughter.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
November 15, 1956

THEATER

'A Very Special Baby'

By WALTER KERR

FOR A WHILE at the Playhouse Wednesday night I kept wondering why Howard Bay's setting had to be so monumentally cluttered, so toweringly overweight that it seemed ready to slide down the raked linoleum stage floor and into our laps at any moment. Banked above us were the full-fledged refrigerators, counters and massed cutlery of a Long Island kitchen, the ornately carved woodwork and fancy cut glass and grandfather clocks of a Long Island living room, the outdoor tree benches and barbecue tables that make for old-fashioned suburban living. Higher still loomed a fully-detailed second-story bedroom and aloft over that hung the shingled eaves and glowering dormers of a relentlessly realistic roof.

Gradually I found out why the porcelain machinery and the stained brown bric-a-brac had to crowd so deeply downstage that the players were working on a narrow and nervous apron at the footlights. Mr. Bay's scenery must fill up the acting space because the play is so small.

It is by now a cliche to say that plays expanded from television scripts, or fathered by writers trained in television, tend to grope and strain and sigh after a size that the theater demands and cannot do without. But how is one to dispose of a cliche if it is unhappily true?

The family flareups that constitute Robert Alan Aurthur's "A Very Special Baby" hang by a very slender thread. The baby of the title is a thirty-four-year-old bachelor who has taken a few potshots at life, always permitted himself to be drawn back into the faintly neurotic orbit of his domineering father, and now wants to make enough of a break from the old homestead to set himself up in a radio repair shop. The problem—and I don't mean to dismiss it—is to get him out the front door.

For five scenes Mr. Aurthur nurses the boy, the father, an unmarried sister, two older and successfully flown brothers, and a wartime friend through the accurately observed minutiae of Italian-American life. The patois rings true ("You don't believe me, I'll show you movies, sixteen millimeter, colored movies!"). Bits of humor erupt (the father, asked to contribute to a Navajo charity, mutters "Indians—only in America would this thing happen!"). The detail is right—there's quite a lyrical paean to a remembered 1911 Hupmobile—and a second-act family conference is harrowing in its successive humiliations.

Furthermore, director Martin Ritt has given the family embraces, bickerings, and roustabout brawls the old Kazan in an effort to expand their proportions.

From Jack Warden, in particular, he has drawn a robust, virile and thoroughly engaging performance: as the flailing "baby" who is treated like "an idiot hod-carrier," Mr. Warden shyly offers a slogan for his projected shop, lets his feet scamper jubilantly when his hopes are high, and cringes in tears before an adamant patriarch to sometimes chilling and sometimes heart-warming effect.

From everyone else in the company he has got the scraping intensity he wanted. Luther Adler is fine as an alternately caustic and genial parent who has built his fortune by carrying bricks on his back; Sylvia Sidney makes her taut and desperate spinster appealing; Will Kuluva, Carl Low, and Jack Klugman utter their own low-key observations with simple, steady belief.

But neither the occasional violences nor the sober, slightly righteous moralizing that mark the end of the evening can conceal the fact that in Scene Five we are still anxiously traversing the ground of Scene Two. As Mr. Warden fondles the table model of the store he hopes to own, you are apt to be reminded that "A Very Special Baby" is, essentially, a table-model play.

New York Post

November 15, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Drama of a Tyrannous Father

Titles certainly can be deceptive in the theater. I, for one, would have expected a play called "A Very Special Baby" to be a light, whimsical and perhaps slightly arch comedy with a bit of sex in it. And I couldn't have been more mistaken. What Robert Alan Aurthur, who spells his name the hard way, has written under this uninformative title had its first performance at the Playhouse last night, and it turned out to be a sullen, austere and unrelievedly depressing slice-of-life drama that, after a feeble first half, suddenly achieved a bitter tension of impressive proportions.

It is a play which is assuredly its own worst enemy. For the first two of its five scenes, it seemed to me an almost perfect example of the sort of flat, mechanical and literal naturalism that represents the contemporary realistic drama in its most unimaginative aspects. Its story of the family of Italian ancestry dominated by a selfish and imperious father, with the aging unmarried daughter completely cowed by the old man's tyranny and the 34-year-old son turned into an ineffectual and feckless child, appeared at best set for one of those happy turning worm conclusions.

In the final three scenes, though, it quite amazingly comes to sullen and resentful life. If it is the story of the turning worm, it is a version of the tale in which the worm revolts bleakly and hopelessly. The son's rebellion remains pathetically wistful and uncertain, and the air of doomed sadness never quite lifts. To the end, the drama continues to be more painful than satisfyingly moving, and the potential exhilaration of authentic tragedy is missing. But it is nevertheless true that the final scenes have an honest emotional power of tensely touching quality.

If you can put up with the slow and disturbingly commonplace beginning, I think you will find "A Very Special Baby" absorbing and not easy to forget. If it is unimaginative realism, it is also realism of unusual honesty and candor, and it has the admirable capacity of making one believe its characters utterly and follow the pathetic revolt of the hapless central figure with sympathy and pity. Mr. Aurthur may not write with the highest skill but there is nothing cheap or fraudulent about him and, at his best, he can achieve real force and compassion.

It would have been simple for the playwright to make the rebellion of the son seem triumphant, give the daughter a ringing scene of denunciation, and overwhelm the loathsome father in defeat, and it might have given the drama an easier road to popularity. But it would have been less honest and relentless, and, while I wish Mr. Aurthur had a greater gift for eloquent tragedy, it is immensely to his credit that he is, when he gets down to it, so forthright and unafraid. In its own way, such realistic candor has its strength and its victories.

The acting is admirable. Jack Warden, an unfailingly fine player, is notably moving and honest in the title role, and the son changes from foolishness to pathos with the surest skill. Sylvia Sidney offers one of her ablest performances as the daughter, and Luther Adler plays the domineering father with force and credibility. Jack Klugman is especially good as the son's loyal friend, and Will Kuluva and Carl Low are excellent in the smaller roles of two rather equivocal brothers. Despite its early weaknesses, I have admiration and respect for "A Very Special Baby."

The New York Times
November 15, 1956

Theatre: Family Drama

'A Very Special Baby' Opens at Playhouse

By BROOKS ATKINSON

AFTER the curtain has been up on "A Very Special Baby" for five or ten minutes at The Playhouse, where it opened last evening, a few things are obvious. Robert Alan Aurthur is a very earnest, highly-wrought playwright. Under Martin Ritt's intense and flaming direction, the actors are as highly-wrought as the playwright.

Mr. Aurthur is writing about an Italian family in affluent circumstances, dominated by a tyrannical father. He is an immigrant who has made a lot of money as a building contractor. Now that he is retired and spends the winters in Florida, the family funds are managed at family meetings in which the two older sons, who are successful professional men, have the decisive influence.

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Since Mr. Aurthur writes in primary colors at top speed and in full voice, it is a little difficult to understand what he is driving at until well on in the evening. He is portraying the unmarried son, who is in his thirties, and the unmarried daughter who is in her forties, as the victims of the father's smugness and arrogance. The father kills the family project of setting up the younger son in business. In a fit of passion he also denounces the son as the murderer of his mother, who died in childbirth. At the conclusion, it appears that the daughter, who wants her freedom, is condemned to spending the rest of her life keeping house for her father. Things are pretty gloomy when the curtain comes down.

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All this is written elliptically with a lot of local color and subordinate detail in a style that Clifford Odets brought into the theatre with "Waiting for Lefty" and "Awake and Sing." It is acted with tautness and drive as though it had been staged by a committee composed of three Elia Kazans.

Luther Adler plays the father with tremendous force and craft. Although he does not talk any louder than the other male actors, he is in full voice and he is also full of strength. Sylvia Sidney, in the part of the daughter, is tense with nerves and frustration.

The other parts are played with highly charged spontaneity or manly camaraderie by Jack Warden, Jack Klugman, Will Kuluva and Carl Low. In his single setting, Howard Bay has ably caught the inside and outside of a fairly tasteless Long Island home and given the impression of a house that is lived in.

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Out of respect for the author's earnestness and the enflamed conviction of the acting, one does not want to be lacking in appreciation. But to this department, "A Very Special Baby" seems more like a stunt than a play. Everything is carefully contrived. The performance sweeps along at high speed. The dialogue is written with a rush of vernacular.

But "A Very Special Baby" seems to have no roots. The excitement is on the surface. When the final curtain falls, nothing seems to have been accomplished except that the author has stayed the distance. Whatever idea he originally had in mind seems to have been overwhelmed by the external fury and the excitement.

Journal-American
November 15, 1956

Sad Start But Strong Finish

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE clients at The Playhouse last night were given a live audition of a pretty good television show. The set is arranged so the cameras can follow the actors from the living room to the kitchen, to an upstairs bedroom and even outside.

When some parts of the premises are not in use they are blacked out, and actors are left brooding in the half light. Further visual aid is offered by the fact that the stage is sharply canted, and the performers run up and down hill with the agility of mountain goats, pausing occasionally with one knee bent to keep their balance. They even cooked a live steak, over a live fire, and the live odor which penetrated well into the audience was double ugly. Still and all, it wasn't a bad little TV unspectacular.

But as a theatrical production, "A Very Special Baby," by Robert Alan Aurthur, didn't fare so well. It seemed to me to be a quite moving one-act drama which stubbornly refused to be stretched into a full evening in the theatre.

It had its moments of drama and unremitting emotion; there were some laughs and some notable "bits." But it should not have taken so long in the telling; the second act is enough—and by that time it's too late.

The story concerns a 34-year-old son of a wealthy immigrant who has failed to adjust himself to a career after service in the Wars. He is the "Very Special Baby," catered to by a middle-aged sister and the tyrannical old man who privately resents him because the mother died during his birth. The drama revolves around the son's belated effort to borrow money from his father to start out in business with an Army chum.

As it is presented the first act is mostly dreary exposition, the procedure which even television has discovered means of reducing and which only Eugene O'Neill seems capable of sustaining for more than brief scenes. The second act, however, comes almost immediately alive. Here there are hints of great promise, and one wishes that the show could begin at that point and go on to some more gratifying conclusion a couple of acts later. But it ends, almost unexpectedly, on a note of simple frustration.

The performances, however, are uniformly brilliant. Luther Adler is a relentless, domineering father; Sylvia Sidney, most handsome and beguiling, gives a magnificent account of herself as the sister; Jack Warden, as the "baby" is both an expert comedian and an emotional actor of singular promise, and Jack Klugman, Will Kuluva and Carl Lowround out the remainder of a notable cast.

I am aware of the difficulties of building a single set to encompass an entire house and yard, but I was not exactly overwhelmed by Howard Bey's interpretation of same. On the other hand, I thought Martin Ritt's direction was outstanding most of the time.

Fact is, there's a lot of good in "A Very Special Baby," but it's all in the last half. If you're going, don't rush through that second cup of coffee.

DAILY NEWS

November 15, 1956

'A Very Special Baby' Relentless Family Squabble in Five Scenes

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The drama which opened last evening at the Playhouse, "A Very Special Baby," is a long, dreary and exceedingly noisy family squabble. Eugene O'Neill's great "Long Day's Journey Into Night" is a family squabble, too—but here ends, absolutely, any similarity between the two plays.

The "special baby" of last night's drama is a 34-year-old lunkhead, played in a steady high whine by Jack Warden, who hasn't done any work since he got out of Korea even though he knows how to fix television sets. He has been waiting all this time for his former sergeant to join him so they can start an appliance store near Levittown.

He has an awful time, and so does everybody else, because of Pop. Pop is a dictator who has made $2,000,000 carrying bricks (to hear him tell it), bred three daughters and three sons, and, as one of his children puts it, been "shacked up with four different broads" since his wife died.

Little Progress

Pop is obviously mad at something, because somebody is always protesting "Oh, Pop" or "You don't love me, Pop." The only happy note in the play is that nobody loves Pop, either.

I have a feeling that the author, Robert Alan Aurthur, has tried most earnestly to combine Eugene O'Neill and Paddy Chayefsky. To his credit, he can write straight, pithy dialog—but there is little depth to the characters who speak his words, and there is little dramatic progress in the five scenes of the play.

Aurthur's family is purportedly Italian-American and it lives in a Long Island suburb in a house that Pop built. This patriarch is played with great ferocity by Luther Adler. His other two sons—a smug doctor and a smug lawyer—are portrayed by Carl Low and Will Kuluva. One of his daughters, forced into a forlorn spinsterhood by Pop, is impersonated by Sylvia Sidney. The only member of the company who never yells is Jack Klugman, who enacts the ex-sergeant in a couple of quietly bitter scenes.

There is an excellent raked-stage setting of the house, including upstairs, downstairs and back yard, by Howard Bay. In its atmosphere and adaptability it is worthy of a profound drama.

"Child of Fortune"

Daily Mirror

November 14, 1956

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Child of Fortune' Misses the Mark

• Adaption of Henry James work lacks consistent drive.

It was said that Henry James wrote novels like a psychologist, while his brother William wrote psychological tomes like a novelist. Anyway, William became a great teacher, the father of pragmatism, and was quite content to like happily and prosperously here in his native America.

Not so, the haughty Henry. Embarrassed by his countrymen's brash, materialistic ways, he fled to England, and transferred his allegiance and citizenship. He found British snobs more compatible than gauche Americans. Yet, we suspect, he wasn't altogether at home there, either.

HENRY JAMES WAS detached in dealing with characters and plot. He often invested the latter with a supernatural touch. There was something decadent about him. Perhaps that's why he preferred the society of a withering aristocracy to the rugged vitality of our self-made millionaires.

This is by way of telling you that Jed Harris brought Guy Bolton's "Child of Fortune," adapted from James' "Wings of the Dove," to the Royale Theatre Tuesday evening. We thought the new arrival possessed of Jamesian faults and virtues. Its characters proved fascinating, but they moved toward a conclusion with the lassitude of the weary and overbred.

An impoverished British journalist had an affair with an ambitious girl on the fringe of society. She urged him to court and marry a visiting American heiress, doomed to an imminent death of an incurable disease. Then they could live in style for the rest of their scheming lives.

But their plan came a cropper. For the young newspaperman truly fell in love with the victim. So much so that upon her demise, he, conscience-stricken, refused the large fortune left him in her will. Thereby providing a bitter, ironic ending to a dourly romantic play.

BOLTON, IT SEEMS to us, has caught the essentials of the James story, but failed to capture the subtleties, the shadings and the cogency of a work that loomed large in its time. He has fashioned a diffuse script that flares into life and point all too rarely. **It is a case of provocative promise without truly rewarding fulfillment.**

Jed Harris must have chosen to do "Child of Fortune" because of the artistic and commercial success enjoyed by his production of "The Heiress," also based on a James novel. But Jed's magic with plays and players strikes us as being a bit dulled in this instance. His direction, too, seldom gives strength to the wings of this dramatic flight.

Edmund Purdom reminded us a little of a young James Mason, as the journalist honest beyond his own good. Betsy Von Furstenberg was well cast as the overly clever girl with whom he had an understanding. Pippa Scott brought a nice quality to the rich American destroyed by disillusionment and illness. Martyn Green, as a gallant bounder, and Mildred Dunnock, as a Puritanical companion, were excellent.

"Child of Fortune" is a drama of distinction — in momentary flashes. We can only regret that it lacks the consistent drive, inspiration and focus to make it a genuinely absorbing evening of theatre. It offers so much of merit that it is with hesitancy we report—not quite enough.

"CHILD OF FORTUNE"

Play by Guy Bolton; adapted from "Wings of the Dove" by Henry James; staged by Jed Harris; settings by Robert O'Hearn; costumes by William Pitkin; presented by Mr. Harris at the Royale Theatre; November 13, 1956. The cast:

Bennett.....Bert Bertram
Lionel Croy.....Martyn Green
Kate Croy...Betsy von Furstenberg
Richard Denning...Edmund Purdom
Milly Temple.....Pippa Scott
Mrs. Lowder.....Norah Howard
Susan Shepherd...Mildred Dunnock
Sir Luke Street, M.D..Peter Pagan
Eugenio.....Anthony Di Palazzo
Bianca.....Mary Foskett

DAILY NEWS

November 14, 1956

'Child of Fortune' Is Not Long for World

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The heroine of "Child of Fortune," which Jed Harris presented at the Royale Theatre last evening, is a sweet gentle, soft-spoken invalid who is not long for this world.

So, too, I fear, is the play. It is an occasionally charming period piece, by Guy Bolton out of Henry James which lacks the heft and grit and muscle necessary for survival in the bitterly cold climate of the commercial theatre.

The source is a James novel, "Wings of the Dove." From it Bolton has fashioned an Edwardian romance in which nobody comes onstage without being announced by a butler and nobody moves offstage in a state of any kind of excitement. Producer Harris has directed this little nosegay in the low key in which it was written—and a low key is no key for an okay today.

The plot involves three actors—Betsy von Furstenberg, a hard-thinking but penniless English girl; Edmund Purdom, a beautiful but penniless American journalist, and Pippa Scott, a lovely American girl who has two million William Howard Taft dollars, a sweet disposition and a fatal blood disease.

Hatching a Plot

This Betsy lass and this Purdom fellow, who have already reached a nice arrangement, figure it would be worth a few months or a year of waiting while he courts the pallidly pretty Miss Scott and gains her fortune by marrying her and becoming her widower. On the stage of the Royale last evening, he conducted the courtship with much of the ardor and technique Morgan, the basset hound, used to use in wooing the TV camera that had the red light on.

The rest of the plot and performances aren't much livelier, but I must say that Pippa Scott, who is making her local stage debut, is a girl of considerable charm and understanding. The locale of this sentimental trifle veers between London and Venice, and among the other actors who from time to time occupy Robert O'Hearn's rather scraped-up scenery are Martyn Green, Norah Howard, Mildred Dunnock, Stafford Dickens and Peter Pagan.

What is meant to be the fetchingest scene in the work is the end of the first scene of the third act, when Pippa is about to pass. Purdom gathers her to him on a sofa and says, "Rest your head on my shoulder. Draw my strength. You must fight . . ."

Journal American

November 14, 1956

James Novel Adaptation Is Ungratifying

By JOHN McCLAIN

JED HARRIS is one of the most gifted and controversial figures in the American theatre, and so in viewing "Child of Fortune," a Guy Bolton adaptation of a Henry James novel which Harris presented at the Royale Theatre last night, one is perhaps inclined to expect too much. He has a lavish cast and agreeable mountings, but I found no trace of the erstwhile genius which was equal to lifting a rather pedestrian story into eminence.

In this one he has what appears to be the bedrock of solid drama; it may not be brand new, but it is workable. Whether it is the writing or the regulation of the players, it is beyond my ability to judge, but the fact remains that what emerges is not gratifying.

The end is always in sight, and what happens on the journey becomes a matter of slight consequences; it is the ageless omission of caring too little about the characters.

An Irish journalist is in love with an impoverished English young lady of quality. Through her he meets an American heiress, and when the two lovers discover that she will die in a year of an incurable disease they conspire to solve their financial problem. He will make love to her, marry her if necessary, and their future will be amply provided for in her will. It's almost as simple as that.

The difficulty seems to be that none of the characters, with a few unimportant exceptions, achieves sympathetic stature. One is loath to care much what happens to the little British lady who lays the plot, nor the gallant Gael who goes for it. Miss Moneybags, U. S. A., appears hopelessly naive—such a one would have long since been snared by an Edwardian adventurer. And the Irish journalist does not come off with that much charm or persuasion.

In any such evening there must, of course, be moments of individual achievement. There is Pippa Scott, who plays the role of the child of misfortune, poor little rich girl. She is fresh and bouyant, she is a good actress and she is very pretty.

Betsy von Furstenberg, who stepped into an enormous part at the last minute, has done her career no harm. She has a strenuous scene with Mildred Dunnock in the last stanza which nearly brings belief to the play's conception.

About Edmund Purdom there are reservations from this sector. I was never quite sure of his emotions: how much did he really care for Betsy, when did he cease to care, when did he sincerely open his heart to Pippa? Subtle, yes, but so subtle one finally felt he didn't breathe.

Competence Shown

With the likes of Martyn Green, Mildred Dunnock and Stafford Dickens there can be no reservations. Miss Dunnock is fragile and forthright as the companion of the heiress, Mr. Green has an amusing exposition scene in the first act, and Mr. Dickens proceeds competently through most of the play as the doctor, keeping the audience advised about the patient's progress.

Norah Howard appears briefly and to good effect as the aunt of the scheming Miss von Furstenberg.

"Child of Fortune" is a highly tenuous piece of dramatic material, but here it has not been fashioned into a very compelling entity.

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THEATRE CRITICS' REVIEWS

New York Post

November 14, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

Effort to Dramatize Henry James

There is a curious lack of dramatic vitality in "Child of Fortune" that isn't characteristic of plays produced or staged by the dynamic Jed Harris. This adaptation by Guy Bolton of Henry James' novel, "Wings of the Dove," seems to have most of the faults of an inexpert attempt to transform the materials of a subtle work of fiction into effective theatrical terms, and at the Royale Theater last night, where it had its first local performance, it never managed to arouse itself from its odd air of languor and lethargy.

The atmosphere of lifelessness appeared all the more unfortunate and surprising to those of us who remember with pleasure Mr. Harris' production of "The Heiress," which was a dramatization of another James novel, "Washington Square." Where the former work had vitality, style and notable emotional effectiveness, while always maintaining the quality of the eminent novelist, "Child of Fortune" is listless, undistinguished in manner and dialogue, and almost entirely without dramatic interest, while suggesting James chiefly in its absence of theatrical vigor.

Heiress Abroad

There is, I must admit, something almost heroic in its determined refusal to come to grips with its subject matter in dramatic terms. In the most desultory fashion, it sets about telling its story of the ailing American heiress visiting in England and Italy, who gains in health and strength as long as she thinks a weak-willed young British journalist is in love with her, but pines away and dies when she discovers that he has been having an affair with a shallow and selfish English relative of hers. It's a sad little tale, but far from a stimulating one.

A scene in the last act, where the dying heiress confronts the young fellow and finds when it is too late that he isn't as callous as she thought he was, does have a touch of drama about it, but all the rest is ineffectuality. Indeed, the only character possessing any sort of theatrical life is the treacherous English girl, and, since Betsy von Furstenberg has a talent for portraying such a conniving female believably, her appearances give the play its only approach to liveliness.

Lack of Emotion

If "Child of Fortune" turns out to be very little in the way of dramatic narrative, it is even less as a study in international contrasts, contemplation of character, or exercise in irony. And I can't believe that Mr. Harris has done anything in his direction to give it either point or freshness. Nor has he been able to do much about keeping it from seeming almost unbearably static as it proceeds with a story that, for all its air of sadness, is never emotionally moving.

Pippa Scott, a newcomer who looks remarkably like Nanette Fabray, plays the unhappy heiress attractively but is unable to do what the playwright couldn't do and make the poor girl interesting. Edmund Purdom, as the man she loves, is but moderately effective, and Mildred Dunnock has far from one of her best roles as the heroine's loyal but foolish companion. Next to Miss Von Furstenberg, the most helpful performances are contributed by Stafford Dickens as a doctor and Peter Pagan as a rejected suitor. "Child of Fortune" just won't come to life.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

November 14, 1956

It's Mighty Weak Medicine

By TOM DONNELLY.

"What we are seeing is a demonstration of the medicinal power of happiness," observes the physician who serves as a kind of master of moribund ceremonies in "Child of Fortune" (at the Royale).

That's his opinion. Now, if you will accept the diagnoses of a layman. "Child of Fortune" is yet another demonstration of a melancholy truth. When a dramatist (in this case, Guy Bolton) reduces a Henry James novel (in this case, "The Wings of the Dove") to a bare skeleton of plot, the result is something to be whisked quickly out of sight and tucked away in a small folding casket.

"Child of Fortune" is the one about the fatally ill heiress ("Only a year to live"; it's always a year or six months, never two years or eight months) who falls prey to a scheming young man.

The Old, Old Plot.

The young man is egged on by his mistress, and imagine her consternation when in the end he confesses that he has actually fallen in love with the stricken lady.

Well, you don't have to imagine the consternation of the evil one. That consternation has figured in the denouements of countless plays, films, novels and soap operas. ("Tune in on 'Aunt Jenny's Real Life Story' tomorrow at this time and find out how our heroine reacts to the shocking news of her sweetheart's perfidy and her best friend's connivance.")

"The Wings of the Dove" is another matter, of course, with its subtle metaphysical overlay, its fastidious probings of the souls and minds of its characters, and its passionately minute examinations of the grip of a finger on a tea cup, or of a vowel or consonant enunciated in an exquisitely pallid drawing room.

Nuance to Nuisance.

"The Wings of the Dove" is all nuance. "Child of Fortune" is a thorough nuisance.

The evening is successful in at least one regard. A young actress named Pippa Scott plays the ailing rich girl from America with a gentle radiance that is just what Dr. James might have ordered.

Her associates come to grief in one fashion or another. In the novel, Kate Croy is a villainess of such fresh vigor, and such fine perceptions, that it seems coarse to call her a villainess at all. Mr. Bolton has reduced this fascinating character to something approximating zero, and Betsy Von Furstenberg quite forgivably makes nothing of her.

Edmund Purdom stands about very handsomely as the guilty hero, and when he is called upon to say something like, "I find there are delicate shades in this matter of double dealing," he achieves an unusual histronic effect which might be called an unfurrowed frown.

Ho Hum.

Some respected veterans are lost in the gloom: Mildred Dunnock, Martyn Green, Norah Howard.

Stafford Dickens, as the presiding physician, regularly delivers himself of grandiose bedside bulletins which sound as if S. J. Perelman had had a hand in them: "This isn't a cold in the head, Mrs. Shepherd, we're dealing with one of the most obscure subjects in medicine." I thought he was perfectly killing.

Jed Harris, who got a lot of mileage out of a previous dramatization of a James subject ("The Heiress"), has produced and directed "Child of Fortune" with an eye fixed unwaveringly on dullness.

Robert O'Hearn's sets (A morning room in London, a sitting room in Venice) are echoing vaults.